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'We failed the most vulnerable': Dr. Tam's biggest takeaway after a year of COVID-19

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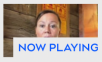

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OTTAWA – The biggest lesson Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam says she learned from the experience with COVID-19 a year into the pandemic is that: "we failed the most vulnerable."

"I think the tragedy and the massive lesson learned for everyone in Canada is that we were at every level, not able to protect our seniors, particularly those in long-term care homes," Tam said in an interview on CTV's Question Period. "Even worse is that in that second wave, as we warned of the resurgence, there was a repeat of the huge impact on that population."

As of March 11—the one year mark since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic—more than 22,000 Canadians had died after contracting the virus, which over the last 12 months hit Canada's seniors the hardest, with outbreaks experienced in care homes across the country, as well as in workplaces or communities where people are in close quarters.

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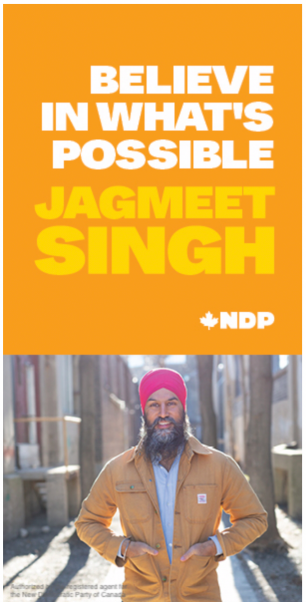
"That will be forever etched in our collective memory, is how we failed the most vulnerable people in our society.



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Dr. Theresa Tam

Not just seniors, racialized populations, women, and people in congregate... housing, so that is the biggest lesson learned, for sure," she said.

Tam said that it is a positive indication that now seniors and other vulnerable groups are being prioritized for vaccination. However, systemic changes still need to be implemented to ensure the vulnerabilities the virus has exposed, are addressed.

Her reflections echo the key takeaways from the Public Health Agency's 2020 annual report, in which she called for "structural change" across health, social, and economic sectors in the wake of COVID-19.

The report highlighted the disproportionate health impacts experienced by workers who provide essential services, racialized populations, people living with disabilities or mental illnesses, and women.

It also includes recommendations on how to improve the country's pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery.

The report says among the changes Canada needs to make in light of COVID-19 are improving employment conditions and conditions inside long-term care homes; increasing access to housing; and enhancing Canadians' ability to access social and health services. These are calls for change that governments have acknowledged but months after the report was issued, are largely still left unanswered.

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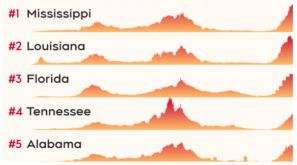

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